

OXFORD

MAGAZINE

No. 425 Fifth Week Michaelmas Term 2020

It has been said that one should not waste a crisis. The present pandemic has forced many changes but this is also the moment to think ahead to the possible future consequences, good and bad. Even at the height of World War Two—when the outcome was far from clear—the likes of Beveridge, Attlee and the visionary Michael Young were planning the changes that would soon create the modern welfare state, including the NHS, leading on later to the Consumers' Association, the National Extension College, the Open University and the University of the Third Age.

Already it is evident that as a result of Covid many things will no longer be the same in future. Home working will become more of a norm; the commute will become less of a time-waster and traffic may be reduced; parking might even become less of a nightmare. The high street will in many respects become a distant memory—alongside banks, post offices and the local pub—as on-line shopping and Deliveroo become entrenched. Airline travel will remain a rare luxury as we think twice about exotic holidays or crossing the world to visit dis-

A good disaster

tant family members or as, in our working lives, we use Zoom to communicate so effortlessly with our academic colleagues across the world, rather than parading at pricey conferences at the most desirable locations. Even *Nature Journals* have decided to go Open Access in future. Like social media, this general and ever-greater reliance on IT and the web—and the general cost-free access to knowledge—is in many respects liberating, enhancing of democracy and certainly more efficient.

Many of these trends are now irreversible; they were coming anyway but have simply been accelerated by Covid. Positive gains as many of them are, they also come with consequences that are distinctly negative. The monopolistic big tech companies will acquire yet further control over our personal lives. The obscene wealth in the hands of half a dozen founding individuals shames us as a token of the unacceptable inequalities in resources and opportunities in modern societies. The inexorable rise of AI and robots—in the hands of those companies, our governments or the police—not only intrusively threatens individual freedoms but—despite the claims

Oxford Magazine publication arrangements

We are unable to publish the *Oxford Magazine* in print for the foreseeable future, as a result of COVID19-related working restrictions. Arrangements for archival copies will be made at a later date.

We will continue to publish online editions of the *Oxford Magazine* and send emails to our online subscribers. We will also send emails to our print subscribers, where we have an email address for them, so that they continue to receive the *Magazine* in an available format.

If you are a print subscriber and do not wish to receive such emails, please visit www.staffsubs.ox.ac.uk and cancel your subscription.

If you would like to set up a new email subscription, please visit www.staffsubs.ox.ac.uk if you are a current member of staff; otherwise, please email gazette@admin.ox.ac.uk.

INSIDE

● ADMISSIONS TRAINING
Page two

● MORAL VALENCES
Page four

● LINE MANAGEMENT
Page seven

...and much more

of the AI fraternity – must ultimately take away the jobs of all but a select elite ‘professional’ few. Moreover AI seems likely to exacerbate the home-bound isolation that comes with all the above trends. Social isolation is perhaps, after climate change, the next most fundamental challenge for society to resolve. A fifth of the UK adult population lives alone.

We occupy many hours in the day texting or gaming. We become increasingly segregated into echo chambers of selectively-informed and similarly-opinionated persons. The frightening political, value-based divide that we see in the USA could, with the usual delay, be replicated here. The social media are key drivers of these trends and the direct source of the current degrading of evidence-based, intelligent and productive discourse as abusive and intimidating language – one is tempted to call it ‘Trumpian’ – is facilitated.

In a nutshell, universities stand out as the future solution that we need to build on. They are designed, by definition, to encourage and promote the meeting and resolving of conflicting value-systems. They are training grounds for civilised and constructive modes of communication, discourse and negotiation. They are where young people reach their full maturity, emotionally as well as intellectually. They equip the next generation with knowledge and skills in evidence-based argumentation, on the foundation of which future elections and political systems will depend.

As items in this issue show, our University is a testing ground for the meeting of diverse cultural attitudes. We still have much to learn as regards achieving consensus among opposing value-groups. But Oxford, alongside Cambridge, has the unique and immense advantage that its college system is the perfect embodiment of an institution that is designed to foster and facilitate social interaction and the development of communality, as well as new ideas. Long live our colleges and tutorials.

* * *

Meanwhile, an update on the *Magazine*’s new scheme for inviting questions from staff members on matters of concern to them for forwarding to Wellington Square for authoritative answers. So far we have forwarded three questions. As yet we have received no answers, nor even any acknowledgements.

Questions and answers will be published in our new Q&A column as soon as possible; answers will be forwarded to questioners themselves as soon as they are received. We remind readers that their names will only be revealed to Wellington Square or published in the Q&A column with their prior agreement, in order to allow greater freedom for staff to raise controversial or sensitive issues with safety.

Please send us your questions.

B.B, T.J.H

Admissions Training – meet the Blob

ROGER TEICHMANN

MANY new tutors at Oxford will soon be participating in undergraduate admissions for the first time. They, like everyone else involved in admissions, are now required to undergo training to this end: they must take the Undergraduate Admissions Training Course. The format, content and general thrust of this course will be familiar to those who’ve been around for a while, but for new tutors the whole experience may come as something new and strange, and not only for reasons having to do with the pandemic.

Taking the course will certainly prepare these new tutors, giving them real insight into the sorts of things they can expect. Before they took the course they may have had little idea of just how much will come down to them from the various Offices, Institutes, Teams, Units and Centres that oversee us and guide our faltering steps. They will begin to get some inkling of the huge amount of activity going on behind the scenes, in the offices of Wellington Square and elsewhere. In that sense, the training course succeeds admirably in preparing a tutor for Oxford’s ways. It introduces them to the Blob.

As an old hand, I was required to undergo retraining, or rather ‘refresher training’. To complete the course you have to do sufficiently well on the multiple-choice quiz at the end of each module to earn the right to move to the next module. If you give a wrong answer, or too many wrong answers, the wrongness of your answer(s) is duly explained and you are asked to ‘try again’. I came unstuck

almost immediately. I gave a ‘wrong’ answer to question 2 of module 1, and on reading the ‘explanation’ decided that, no, my answer had in fact been correct (or rather, the best out of three). Naturally I gave the same answer on my second attempt. I was again instructed to retake the quiz. A horrible fascination concerning the contents of the subsequent modules got the better of me, and I gave up giving the answers I thought correct and ticked the boxes I guessed the Blob wanted me to tick. And if I guessed wrong, it wasn’t hard to recall, on my second attempt, which of the two or three answers had just been required of me. In this way I completed the course.

What, you might ask, is the point of this way of doing things? Is it thought that all those ‘explanations’ must be bound to persuade any rational being who reads them? (Then why require doing the questions again after reading the explanation?) Or is one just being asked to sign up to statements whether or not one believes them?

* * *

Until well into the nineteenth century those wishing to take a degree or get a post at Oxford were required to express allegiance to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. It must have been common for those unpersuaded by the truth of all those articles to think, or be told by friends, ‘What does it matter? It’s just saying some words.’ That fact will have been obvious to the authorities – so why did they carry on with the requirement? A

mere exercise of power? No doubt it was partly that; but of course it was also a way of excluding Catholics, Non-conformists and Jews, people whose habits of sincerity would prevent (many of) them from paying lip-service to statements at odds with their cherished beliefs. It seems that the Blob is confident that tutors lack any cherished beliefs that might conflict with the official line. Alternatively, it's aware that there might be such people and would like to make things difficult for them, by requiring them to take a course for the completion of which it is necessary to sign up to a suitably crafted list of statements.

But surely all this talk of cherished beliefs is a bit hysterical? Aren't we just dealing with the technicalities of interviewing, shortlisting, UCAS forms and so on? The answer is no. A large part, perhaps the larger part,¹ of the course's purpose is to introduce the tutor to the importance of various ideas belonging to a certain *ideology*, one which has quite particular things to say about equality, disadvantage, bias, etc.

Now these issues are all obviously important ones. They have been discussed and analysed by many people, within Oxford and outside it, in their general sense and in their specific application to higher education. It is also obvious that they are highly complex issues, about which disagreement among people of good faith is to be expected. But they are issues about which the Blob is very keen we should all agree—which is to say, agree with the Blob view.

There are two possible explanations for this. First, the powers that be wish to pre-empt and deflect external criticism of and hostility towards Oxford University of an ideological nature, by making out that we're all 'getting behind the message'; second, they wish to aim for conformity to an ideology of whose truth they are so persuaded that a plurality of views would seem shocking to them. I imagine there are representatives of both these schools of thought among members of the establishment. But if these are the only two explanations available for the ideological slant of the admissions training course, then we are presented with a choice between official fear and hypocrisy on the one hand, and official fanaticism on the other.

As an example of the slant I am talking about let me mention the sections in module 3 dealing with 'implicit bias'. Many readers will be aware that this notion has received negative, as well as positive, attention from those who have studied such empirical data as are proffered in support of the theory in which 'implicit bias' has its home. But no hint of the existence of any controversy or difference of opinion can be found in the module 3 sections. Thus we find:

'Becoming aware of our implicit biases enables us to set clear and specific intentions to overcome them. The Harvard Implicit Association Test (IAT) measures the strength of a person's automatic association between mental representations of social groups (concepts) and positive or negative ideas (constructs). The IAT is freely available for anyone to use and provides a useful way for people to assess their own biases.'

It's nice to know that the IAT is 'freely available'. But you might prefer to know what its credentials are. Here, Wikipedia scores higher than Oxford University Admissions: go to section 6 of the Wikipedia article on 'Implicit Association Test' for a run-down (with bibliography) of

critical responses. So why is none of the criticism of IAT mentioned in module 3? The answer is obvious: we are meant to accept implicit bias theory without question.

For a second example, I will turn to the section in module 1 on equality legislation. The key legislation referred to is the Equality Act of 2010. Given the reliance on, indeed celebration of, statistical 'targets' by the University² it may come as a surprise to you to learn that:

*'Positive discrimination is recruiting or promoting a person solely because they have a relevant protected characteristic. Setting quotas to recruit or promote a particular number or proportion of people with protected characteristics is also positive discrimination. Positive discrimination is unlawful in Great Britain.'*³

I have written on this topic before in the *Oxford Magazine*, raising the question whether OFFA's 'targets' were the same thing as quotas, and the further question whether the University wasn't therefore risking acting unlawfully, a question I put to the present V-C in a (polite) email in July 2016, receiving from her no response. It may be that Professor Richardson is still chewing over this difficult question, but it also seems possible that her silence reflects the recognition of an awkward truth. The section on equality legislation in the training course similarly sails past all such sources of possible controversy.

* * *

Perhaps it's time for me to confess which question in module 1 I flunked. Here it is:

'An interview is going well, when the applicant mentions that their parents got married in the quad and that their uncle is an active college alumnus/donor. What should you do?'

The three possible answers are:

1. Continue with the interview, note the potential conflict of interest and raise this with your Tutor for Admissions.
2. Ignore the comments—they did not really know what they were saying.
3. Continue with the interview and record the comments made.

(If you have yet to take the course, maybe you should skip this bit. You need to go into your exam without prior knowledge of the answers.)

I plumped for 2, and could defend that choice if necessary, although 'they did not really know what they were saying' seems an odd addition, and 'ignore' isn't quite the right term. If a candidate speaks a bit prattishly, that might or might not be something to register. The 'correct' answer was (is) 1. The explanation for this states that 'as a general point, informing the TfA as soon as possible may allow for alternative interview arrangements to be made if this is deemed necessary.' I think this all means that it may be deemed necessary, given the candidate's comments, to try to get them interviewed at another college, so that you don't have to interview them at your own. After all, you mustn't be seen to be offering places to candidates with personal connections to your college, even if on the usual criteria they would deserve such an offer. But is this either

sane or just? Let the policy be made public: *If you have given money to this college, your near relatives will not be able to study here.* The Development Office may have something to say about that.⁴

In a sense, my preference of answer 2 over answer 1 (I guess answer 3 seems OK also) stems from a simple but crucial thought: *this person in front of me is an individual human being.* They are not a possible statistic, case study, representative of a category, object of a policy decision, or means to a higher end. They are a living, complicated, vulnerable human being, and it is my job to give them a chance to show, as well as they can show in an interview setting, their suitability for being admitted as a student of subject X at Oxford University. This brings me to my final point, concerning the multiple-choice quiz format and what it indicates about the ethos behind the admissions training course.

* * *

I suppose this format has been copied from the kinds of self-assessment programmes prevalent e.g. in business or management. Whether or not that's the case, there are good reasons for thinking it unfitted to the proper assessment of a large range of interviewing skills.

Aristotle speaks of the virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which is an ability to weigh things up – reasons for and against, etc. – wisely and well; and he argues that this ability cannot be encapsulated in a set of instructions, however compendious. Rather, it is acquired through experience: experience of *doing*. He is surely right about all this. Dealing with other human beings, for instance in the context of an interview, requires practical wisdom in this sense. Gauging whether someone is nervous, knows what they're talking about, is getting at something good but in an inarticulate way, is trying to curry favour, lacks real interest in the subject... – all these forms of knowledge (or belief) rest on what Wittgenstein calls a sensitivity to 'imponderables'. Additionally, knowing what sorts of ques-

tions and responses are, in this context, good ones to ask or to make is also a matter of practical wisdom.

Hence the idea that interviewing is a skill that is well assessed (or self-assessed) by what answers a person gives in a multiple-choice quiz must be mistaken. Having 'successfully' completed a list of such quizzes shows nothing, or very little, about a person's capacities as an interviewer – if only because second-guessing the answers and having some short-term memory are all you need (see above). It is bad enough if any faith is put in such 'training'; requiring it of people is an exercise in futility.

Let me be clear: the Undergraduate Admissions Training Course contains quite a lot of useful and accurate information and advice. But it is a great pity that this information and advice should have been mixed in with material whose evident purpose is to achieve ideological conformity among academic staff, a conformity that will make them 'the right sort of people' to be trusted with the job of admitting undergraduates to the University. In addition, skill at interviewing can be achieved neither by the ingestion of unquestioned theoretical claims nor by any box-ticking exercise. Interviewers are human beings with (some degree of) practical wisdom – they are not robots. It is for that reason that the Admissions Operations Team should have aimed at giving advice, rather than issuing instructions. But that is the nature of the Blob.

¹ Take a look, e.g., at the breakdowns of the first three of the six Baseline Survey questions in the Initial Training section.

² See 'Briefing for College Tutors on the New OFFA Targets', Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach, November 2015.

³ Government Equalities Office, *Equality Act 2010: What Do I Need To Know? A Quick Start Guide To Using Positive Action In Recruitment And Promotion*, January 2011, p9.

⁴ Perhaps the worry is that the candidate might repeat what they said outside the interview, so that (if they were offered a place) someone might infer that etc. etc. This wouldn't be a matter of conflict of interest, so much as of institutional fearfulness, and the decision to 'make alternative interview arrangements' would still surely be unjust.

On lives mattering

WILLIAM BOOTH

WHEN I turned to Michael Biggs' 'Whose lives matter?' (*Oxford Magazine*, No 424, Second Week, MT 2020), I anticipated a timely reflection on a crucial current issue; instead I found an extraordinarily mean-spirited, unconvincing, and (I can only assume) disingenuous screed, which – replete as it was with false equivalences – minimises the epidemic of suffering disproportionately exacted upon black (and indeed non-white, more generally) people by the repressive apparatuses of states on both sides of the Atlantic. While I have no doubt of the author's desire that we, as a university, pay better attention to homophobic violence, the manner in which this was conveyed seems – at best – deeply cynical.

The premise of Dr. Biggs' argument rests on two assumptions: first, that the murder (or 'apparent suffocation') of George Floyd was an isolated event, that is to

say the killing of an individual by another individual, decoupled from any broad structural context; the second, though more implicit, is just as troubling: that because of the vague malaise of 'wokeness' in which we find ourselves, the lives of white gay men are devalued because they are not black (and, though I hope this was only clumsily implicit, because they were killed by a brown man?). This seems to point to two linked but distinct imperatives: first, that we, the Oxford University community, ought to be more careful (or, less charitably, more ethnonationalist) in 'ranking' our compassion or grief; and second, that we are unable to care about two events or sets of people at once without demonstrating equivalent compassion or grief 'outputs'.

Dr. Biggs suggests that the perpetrators' 'trials will presumably reveal whether their actions were motivated

(respectively) by racism or by homophobia”. While there is a good chance that the trial of the murderer of Furlong, Ritchie-Bennett, and Wails will reveal homophobic intent, the presumption that the trial of a policeman in the murder of a black man would tell us anything about the officer’s racism is fantastical. I struggle to believe a scholar of Dr. Biggs’ standing and expertise truly believes this, given the plethora of cover-ups, obfuscations, and miscarriages of justice in such cases, hence my – I don’t think *ad hominem* – characterisation of the article’s *faux-naïveté*.

While clearly I have serious objections to the tone of Dr. Biggs’ piece, I would also like to engage with the substantive questions he poses. The first is whether “colonization by U.S. social media companies [has] diminished the value of local lives in relation to American ones?” This comes across as rather patronising. I don’t believe the staff and students of Oxford University are being hoodwinked into ignoring murders in Berkshire thanks to the machinations of Facebook or Twitter. The role of social media in holding powerful institutions – powerful, often, to the point of impunity – to account has been a welcome development to activists and campaigners, but is also, I suspect, appreciated by the wider public, and, more importantly, by the victims of such assaults. What is more, systemic police violence against black people (and prejudicial policing against people of colour more broadly) are hardly confined to the United States. Let us consider deaths in custody. In the United Kingdom, since 1969 only one police officer has been convicted in relation to such a death. He did not receive a custodial sentence. Meanwhile since 2010, black people in the UK have been twice as likely to die in police custody than their white peers. These figures are considerably higher when force has been acknowledged to have been used.

And approaching this question from the other side, homophobic violence has been increasing in the UK. Transphobic violence dramatically so. Does Dr. Biggs wish to remove these acts from the sympathetic purview of people outside the United Kingdom? This seems counterproductively parochial. In recent years in the US there have been horrific acts of violence against, for instance, gay men – should we look away simply because they are far away?

Second, he asks whether “the moral valence of a killing depend[s] on the identity of the perpetrator as much as the identity of the victim”. I assume here Dr. Biggs is insinuating that white people are held to a higher standard than non-white people. Clearly this is not so. In any case, the useful question here does not relate to the *identity* of the perpetrator but to his *role*: should we expect better from police officers? Absolutely. Should we expect more from the state when so many police officers – whether white or not – commit this transgression time and again? Yes. We should.

Finally, he asks “what determines whether particular deaths become invoked by institutions to advance a totalizing metanarrative?” Is that really what has happened here? I agree that we need to critique responses to systemic injustice by institutions or businesses that may ride a wave of public opinion while underpinning the inequalities or oppressions they simultaneously deplore, but if the implication here is that the university, its colleges, and its departments have gone out of their way to ‘advance’ a narrative of widespread police prejudice and violence against black people, they are simply acknowledging what exists.

This is not a ‘totalizing metanarrative’ – though I’m not really sure what that means – but is, rather, a pressing, tangible and measurable reality; what’s more, it is evident that many members of the university community oppose this systemic issue, and both individuals and groups have pushed the university to be more proactive in stating such opposition. By extension, I am sure almost everyone who cares about black lives also cares about the safety and wellbeing of victims of homophobic violence, and while we can certainly do better in advancing such guarantees (as a university, as a city, as a country, and as a global community) I don’t see particular barriers to the *advocacy* of such support.

The question ‘whose lives matter?’ strikes me as bait. If the respondent doesn’t say ‘all lives matter’ then they must be racist, or homophobic, or misogynistic. But we have seen how pointless this sophistry is when groups targeted by violence – violence often, though not exclusively, perpetrated by cisgender, heterosexual white men, who are often wearing a badge that serves as a literal get-out-of-jail-free card – form a majority of our populations. So-called ‘competitive victimhood’ is no substitute for solidarity.

By mutual agreement Dr Biggs has provided the following response to Dr Booth’s commentary:

I thank Dr William Booth for his detailed and nuanced response. Of the many important points raised, I will address just two.

He contends that ‘the presumption that the trial of a policeman in the murder of a black man would tell us anything about the officer’s racism is fantastical’. Derek Chauvin is being prosecuted by Keith Ellison, the Attorney General of Minnesota. The notion that Ellison – an African American and progressive Democrat, who as a student led protest against police brutality – will orchestrate a racist coverup is, I suggest, implausible.¹

Dr Booth concludes by referring to ‘violence often, though not exclusively, perpetrated by cisgender, heterosexual white men’. Men certainly must be blamed for the lion’s share of violence in all known societies, but race is rather less straightforward. According to the most recent figures from the United States, whites perpetrated 41% of homicides (for which the offender’s race is known), while blacks committed 56%.²

¹ Tim Murphy, ‘Keith Ellison’s Entire Career Has Been Building Toward This Moment’, *Mother Jones*, 1 June 2020; <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/06/keith-ellisons-entire-career-has-been-building-toward-this-moment/>.

² FBI, *Uniform Crime Reports*, 2019, Expanded Homicide Data Table 3; <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/crime-in-the-u.s.-2019/tables/expanded-homicide-data-table-3.xls>.

The Making

Never the whole truth
but particulars torn from a pad,
not bound for immortality
but instant, flighted, each arrowhead
piercing fresh cloth
with nothing absolute, a texture
of purposes woven to no end,
perpetual celebration
of the incomplete, its aim
beyond the finished work
with every word
a further possibility
and every blank page
waiting for a shot like this.

Third Time Around

He walked around the mountain once,
counting every step he took
and ready for each circumstance
that fell exactly by the book.

He walked around the mountain twice,
less circumspect the second time
because he heard an inner voice
suggesting he should dare to climb.

Now, throwing caution to the wind
which measures every step he takes
he follows to whatever end
whatever truth his circling makes.

JOHN MOLE

John Mole lives in St Albans and was for many years a teacher there. He has compiled and presented poetry programmes for BBC Radios 3 and 4, was poetry reviewer for *Encounter* and, with Peter Scupham, ran the Mandeville Press. His poetry for both adults and children can be found on the Poetry Archive and his most recent collection is *Gold to Gold* (Shoestring Press, 2020).

The next issue of
Oxford Magazine
will appear in
eighth week

This October, winnowing

The day has shortened, hours are
Books between tightened bookends,
Light slants into the under-growth.

The sun places its last kiss on the roses
As insects devour their dying leaves.
And so the summer sighs into fall:

This is the autumn I have no words for.
Apple picking, meals with friends—
Distant memory. Fear gnaws at the heart.

The virus, like a sickness of the conscience
Has spread together with the war among
The righteous. Hope rattles its inflamed lungs.

Justice coughs, kindness wheezes and spits,
Faith plays double game with oath
And governance, truth has lost both legs.

*

I see us dancing in the kitchen years ago,
Salted vine leaves on the wooden board, herbs,
Mother holding house the way the breast-bone

Covers the heart from whatever could strike,
Father calling for the music, "Children, where
Is the cassette?" We were on Helen Street.

There are calls. There is silence during
The calls. There are quiet walks in the garden
After the calls. The virus roams.

The sun has shortened its working hours.
Time pushes its bookends of light closer
Together. Many will not see the winter.

*

We walk around the yew tree. Blue jays
Hide inside tight-wound branches.
The back garden is a busy landing strip.

A cardinal perches on the kitchen rails,
The chipmunk family argues in the gutters
By the stairs, crickets in widened cracks

Sing away the nights in the basement,
As I pace upstairs in the dark kitchen;
A wood-pecker knocks on the dormer:

Here is the harvest brought by these
Visiting creatures—memories squirreling
Their freedoms away:

Now I see her, never happy on her own
But glowing whenever we were with her,
I see her taking her smile from our faces.

CARMEN BUGAN

Carmen Bugar's new and selected poems, *Lilies from America*, was published in 2019. She is also the author of three other collections of poems, a critical study on Heaney and East Europeans, and the memoir *Burying the Typewriter: Childhood Under the Eye of the Secret Police*. She lives in Long Island, NY, and teaches at the Gotham Writers' Workshop in Manhattan.

More equal than others?

G.R.EVANS

THE months of Covid-governance have brought into sudden visibility a mode of exercise of power in the University that is new. It has been made possible by the change in recent years to an executive-style Vice-Chancellorship with the addition of a 'team' of Pro-Vice-Chancellors with portfolios, many of whom are not career academics. A circular from the Vice-Chancellor on 27 February 2020 refers to her 'senior leadership team' in the context of the work of the Silver Group under the Crisis Management Framework put in place in response to Covid.¹ The circulation of blogs and 'updates' under the names of Pro-Vice-Chancellors has become a fixture in recent months and the Vice-Chancellor promises that they are now to be a regular thing in the newly renamed *University Bulletin*.

If this is an effort at better communication with Congregation that would, of course, be good news. But calling these blogs the work of the 'senior leadership' carries certain implications. This terminology raises the question of the authority both of these statements and of their authors as individuals. Do the bloggers speak on behalf of University committees which may be found in the Statutes and Regulations or in their own voice? What is now being described as a 'senior management team' stands in an undefined relationship to the University's constitutional structures.²

Who are Oxford's 'seniors'?

Oxford's Staff Gateway website gives a list headed 'Senior University Officers', which does not match the list of 'University Officers' in Statute IX. Alternatively it also describes them as 'Senior University Personnel'.³ It explains what they do. The Chancellor 'presides over all major ceremonies'; the Vice-Chancellor 'provides strategic direction and leadership to the collegiate University'; the Registrar 'is responsible for the University's day-to-day administration'; the Pro-Vice-Chancellors [the ones with portfolios] 'take lead responsibility', while 'honorary Pro-Vice-Chancellors without portfolio, assist the Vice-Chancellor in ceremonial matters'; the Proctors and Assessor 'ensure that the statutes, regulations, customs and privileges of the University are observed'. There is a link to another website of 'University Officers'⁴ where a further different list is to be found including 'Heads of Divisions' and a motley collection of others, some known to Statute IX, some not.

The 'bloggers' so far have chiefly been the Pro-Vice-Chancellors with portfolios, to whom is thus attributed 'lead' responsibility. The governing Regulation prefers the adjective 'special'. They are appointed by the Vice-Chancellor:

*'subject to the approval of Council and each of whom shall have special responsibility for designated functions as agreed by Council on the recommendation of the Vice-Chancellor.'*⁵

This seems to suggest that they act in *persona vicecancellarii*, as extensions of the Vice-Chancellor, exercising portions of the responsibilities attaching to that office. If that is so, some important questions about the 'responsibilities', functions and powers of the Vice-Chancellorship arise, which were left 'parked' under Statute IX,⁹ at the time of the North reforms in 1999. Statute IX, 16 similarly 'parked' the arrangements for giving or lending functions and powers to the Pro-Vice-Chancellors.

*Have we lost an 'Arcadian form of government'?*⁶

Oxford recognises an order of seniority in its degrees, which it describes in terms of 'precedence and standing'.⁷ Cambridge Statutes also recognise a ranking of 'seniority of graduates' for the purposes of conferring degrees and arranging the order of the procession when it grants honorary degrees. But beyond this traditional formal academic ranking any suggestion of making one academic 'senior' to another even by promotion has proved controversial.

In a debate in February 1995 several members of Congregation stressed the importance of Oxford remaining a 'community of equal scholars' or a 'scholarly community of equals', sharing membership of a 'republic of letters'.⁸ One speaker protested that:

*'Some, possibly many, members of the poor bloody infantry came here for what distinguished this place from other universities, including other highly prestigious universities. We came here, and stay here, partly for the absence of hierarchy, for the idea that we will be judged on what we do and not on our status.'*⁹

Another regretted for other reasons the vanishing of the early modern idyll of a 'republic of letters', a time now lost, she suggested, when a scholar enjoyed freedom to choose how he or she used his time on behalf of the University and to pursue whatever scholarly enquiries they wished, at whatever pace was appropriate, a time when the:

*'individual would have been content, honoured, and proud to indulge in the range of diverse activities of college versus faculty, of teaching, research, and administration. In times gone by, we like to think, dons were sui generis, unfolding their scholarship at their own pace and, unlike most other professions, setting their own agenda.'*¹⁰

Nor did another speaker believe that the proposal before the House (to create more titular Professors) which was causing all this disquiet would, if adopted, provide 'a purely republican solution' under which the University would 'settle down to a harmonious community of equal scholars'. On the contrary, he feared its adoption would create 'deep division'.¹¹ Those who aspired to 'promotion' and failed could be expected to be resentful.¹² Oxford settled from the 1990s on 'recognition of distinction', and

such academic accolades carried and carry no automatic accretion of powers in the community.

Meanwhile, the influence of Human Resources has expanded greatly in the decades since. For example, on 26 October the Pro-Vice-Chancellor whose GLAM portfolio now includes 'People', published a summary of 'strategic priorities from Personnel Committee and the new Race Equality Taskforce'.¹³ 'Equality' has become a regular and leading concern in Human Resources, but chiefly geared to the attempt to ensure that those with protected characteristics are not disadvantaged. Important though all the work going on in this area undoubtedly is, it is taking attention away from the effect of other forms of inequality that the Equality Act of 2010 did not have in mind.

The University's employees are certainly not 'equals' in the employment relationship. That relationship, long defined as that of 'master and servant',¹⁴ may have evolved since the late nineteenth-century into a voluntary agreement to a contract between equals, but the parties are clearly not equal in the resources needed to protect the theoretical equality of that relationship between the University and one of its academic employees.

The very notion that an academic may have a 'boss' is something relatively new to Oxford and Cambridge. Heads of Department (and more recently Heads of Divisions, alongside the Personnel Committee) have gained a personal authority over individual academics unknown to those of us who joined the tribe a generation ago.¹⁵ This has come with the introduction of the terminology and paraphernalia of 'line-management' and a 'reporting' structure which has introduced a hierarchy among the University's employees. Now all staff have a line manager to whom we are responsible, including presumably even members of the senior leadership team and the Vice-Chancellor. If you have problems at work, you are routinely told, you need to raise them with your line manager in the first instance.

The 'independent persons' in Cambridge in Francis Cornford's *Microcosmographia Academica* of 1908¹⁶ felt free to disagree with one another so energetically because they considered themselves equals in the tradition of centuries in which they were all corporators in their *universitas*. In a disagreement about a point of specialist knowledge there was – and still, thankfully, is – no automatic privilege for the view of the senior – in age, standing, even academic distinction – over the junior. Internal politics, friendship or personal respect may constrain someone from raising a concern or an objection, but not a consciousness of being lower in the essential order of things when it comes to settling the truth on a point in research. It is, however, less certain now that a newcomer to the community will feel the same freedom in other respects, dependent as he or she will inevitably be on the patronage of a 'line-manager'. It is far from apparent that all new appointees these days will be aware how the autonomy of individual academics has become constrained under the terms of their contracts of employment.

Conclusion

The introduction of that adjective 'senior' attached to a self-appointed 'team' inevitably poses a threat to governance by a scholarly community of equals. The problem is not new. An Editorial in the *Oxford Magazine* in Novem-

ber 1956 suggested that: 'Perhaps if Congregation were included more often in genuine consultation there would be less hard feeling when a clash occurs'. It argued that 'we must do more to strengthen the checks and balances and to improve the methods of providing information that ensure Congregation's control'.¹⁷

The arrival of the blogs opens up entirely new issues of responsibility and accountability. They imply not a frank setting before Congregation of matters for its ultimate approval but a summary of decisions taken and policies already framed by a 'senior management team', subject perhaps to Council but not to the ultimate 'control' of the University's sovereign body.¹⁸

Welcome as the Vice-Chancellor's termly Zoom Q&A's are they are in themselves a stark reminder of the new management culture within which we now have to operate in our working lives. Watched by many hundred staff members the Vice-Chancellor repeatedly calls on selected Pro-Vice-Chancellors for their expertise; they then deliver what comes across as the definitive statement on their respective area of University policy.

We should be concerned about the new routes of policy delivery; they represent a reconstruction of some fundamentals of the University's character and constitution by moving directly under the auspices of the Senior Management Team and its members, including the Registrar, more and more initiatives and decisions already made. In the *Gazette* of 4 November the Focus on People Programme has a headline under General Notices, with a paragraph below it on 'the Registrar's blog this week'.

The University's tradition has been for 'issues or concerns' to be raised personally with those on or chairing the relevant committee or through a Congregation Resolution, normally leading to a constructive discussion. Now, in the *University Bulletin* of November 2 we see a yet further extension of the new ways of disseminating University policy:

'Staff feedback indicates that you would welcome an interactive channel to raise issues or concerns in a timely way. The Vice-Chancellor and her senior team encourage this initiative and invite you to send your letters to Letter for the senior team. Your letters will be forwarded to the appropriate senior team member. Letters and responses will be published on the Staff Gateway and linked to in future issues of the University Bulletin.'

¹ <https://staff.web.ox.ac.uk/article/gill-aitken-help-for-personal-development>. Does that make the 'staff gateway' a – even 'the' – primary source of information about the management of employees?

² See *Gazette*, 23 July, for reply to Congregation Question.i

³ <https://staff.admin.ox.ac.uk/structure-and-organisation/senior-university-officers>

⁴ <https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/organisation/university-officers>

⁵ <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/council-regulations-21-of-2002#collapse1426321>

⁶ See Douglas Veale, 'The Administration of the University', his address to the Oxford University Lunch Club, June 8, 1950, *Oxford Magazine* (1950-1), October 12, p.10.

⁷ <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/council-regulations-22-of-2002>

⁸ *Supplement to Gazette*, 6 March, 1995, https://www1.ox.ac.uk/gazette/supps/9495/1_4356.pdf

⁹ Peter Mirfield https://www1.ox.ac.uk/gazette/supps/9495/1_4356.pdf

¹⁰ Susan Greenfield, https://www1.ox.ac.uk/gazette/supps/9495/1_4356.pdf

¹¹ https://www1.ox.ac.uk/gazette/supps/9495/1_4356.pdf

¹² It was partly for that reason that Oxford soon after decided to replace the language of ‘promotion’ with that of ‘recognition of distinction’, and it was decided that the recognition should come ‘without change of stipends or duties’, https://www1.ox.ac.uk/gazette/1995-6/supps/1_4388.htm

¹³ <https://staff.web.ox.ac.uk/article/professor-anne-trefethen-priorities-of-personnel-committee>

¹⁴ Notably in the Master and Servant Act (1867).

¹⁵ See Appendix.

¹⁶ *Microcosmographia Academica*, Chapter 5.

¹⁷ Editorial, ‘governance of the University’, *Oxford Magazine*, November 29 (1956-7), pp.149-52.

Pinocchio

My nose gets longer every passing hour.
I speak, I pour forth words from day to day,
succeed, rub shoulders with the men of power,
and since it's so, who cares what people say
or think? My nose gets longer by the hour.

Meantime, the young are cut down like a flower
in June, a generation scythed away.
I, though, feel fine. I sit in my glass tower,
the sun is shining and I'm making hay.
My nose gets longer, longer by the hour.

I sit here and observe my satraps cower,
knowing they've little choice but to obey,
while some get ulcers, others just look sour.
I think I'll go on fibbing, come what may.
My nose gets longer every passing hour.

Stained Glass Statements

Here, I think, a young man (though not young when I encountered him)
sat through compulsory chapel, termtime Sunday after Sunday
while others yawned or dozed, but however boring or interesting the sermon, it would have been impossible to take his eyes off those windows. Abraham, a Dutchman,
had painted these extraordinary scenes circa 1631.
How did they escape? Perhaps the college, rich enough to pay for them, was secluded enough for the smashers of sacred glass to go elsewhere.
Awe-inspiring visions, huge expanses of water, furious clouds, the whale heaving up to devour Jonah, Judgment Day, Christ seated on a rainbow, the naked dead climbing up, the damned going down to everlasting fire.
The words went over his head, he dreamed of the seventeenth century,
rain and sun on the glass obscured or emblazoned the colours.
Oh, yes, he thought, one day I'm going to write about this.

On Tuesday Evenings

On Tuesday evenings, I retreat into
my private, my most private office. There
they've placed a lamp, a glass and jug of water
(no stronger drink, my mind must not be clouded).
I hear doors closing, slowly all shuts down.
My civil servants shoot me looks of sympathy.

And then, when all are gone, I read the papers again. Again I weigh the arguments,
my natural inclination to show mercy
against the need for lawful punishment.
The letters, tear-stained, badly spelled. The sordid facts of the crime. The victim impact statements.

It's done. About a dozen times a year
I sign. An inexpressible relief.
Below me, in the street, the coloured lights
are flashing and the young are going crazy.
I snap my briefcase shut. I call my chauffeur.

Soon, they'll be gathering, a little crowd,
grey-faced, some on their knees, some mute, all counting.
The clock will strike. The hands move on. I'll sleep,
though;
these cases always leave me drained. I know
someone has got to do this job. I hate it.

MERRYN WILLIAMS

Merryn Williams has published five collections of poetry; the latest is *The Fragile Bridge: New and Selected Poems* (Shoestring Press 2019). She is editing an anthology about corona virus and the 2020 lockdown to be published by Shoestring next year.

Propping up the Dictators

PETER OPPENHEIMER

LIKE any authoritarian regime, the oligarchs of Wellington Square feel the need to construct periodic applause for themselves. A question-begging opinion survey is as good a device as any, especially when few people will remember the last one, fully five years having since elapsed. By the same token, I shall not expect OM readers to recall or consult what I wrote at that time (“A Flawed Survey of University Opinion”, *Oxford Magazine*, No.361, Fifth Week, Trinity Term 2015; and “The Unhappy Culture of Administrative Dominance”, *ibid.* No.364, Second Week, Michaelmas Term 2015). Where appropriate I shall simply repeat it.

On the present occasion the survey was incorporated in the former *Blueprint*—now titled *University Bulletin* (more accurately, Central Administrative Bulletin)—for week 3 of Michaelmas Term. It invited opinions not, as in 2015, about the University’s central administrative services (UAS) as such, but about the UAS’s 34 separate websites. Its intent was made neatly apparent at the outset: “To help with the ongoing management and improvement of these sites, we would like to get a better understanding of how the quality and service has improved.”

The survey was less explicit about being designed so as to be directed at administrative rather than academic staff, thereby ensuring—as in 2015—that it would in large measure elicit mutual back-scratching by central officialdom. Respondents were required to assign themselves to one and only one of five employment areas: UAS; Gardens, Libraries and Museums; Academic division or department; College; and Other. The lumping together of “Academic division or department” gave particular scope for some central bureaucrats to speak without being differentiated from mainstream academics. The survey then involved chiefly box-ticking regarding the usefulness of the 34 websites both individually and collectively, with limited space to offer suggestions for modification.

Besides setting up chants of approval, the recent *Bulletin* serves the purposes of the central oligarchy in other ways. One is to interfere in relations between students and their colleges and/or departments, by encouraging student feedback to the centre “to inform the development of teaching and the wider student experience”—in other words, to furnish spurious justification for central staff numbers in these areas and for ongoing efforts to diminish college autonomy.

Another is to engage in virtue signalling on behalf of the oligarchy. Moves to tighten central enforcement, for instance, are dressed up as anti-racism. The *Bulletin* reiterates the announcement in the recent Vice-Chancellor’s Oration that Pro-Vice-Chancellors Trefethen and Williams are to co-chair “a University-wide task force....to make recommendations for ways that we can address the under-representation of racial minorities at all levels—especially the most senior levels—within the University”. Well, Oxford would be fortunate if (to cite just one idea) Trevor Phillips were to become its Vice-Chancellor tomorrow—but that seems not to be on the agenda. The

underlying issue, evidently, is something different from merit or even-handedness. Furthermore, if you are genuinely looking to the wholehearted support of Oxford’s academic community for some endeavour or other, you don’t label it a “task force” and appoint, of all people, Executive Pro-Vice-Chancellors to chair it.

Nor are these comments exhaustive. It would be valuable, for example, to have at least some hint as to what numerical or other criteria the powers-that-be have in mind. The same Vice-Cancellarial Oration observed that “between 2015 and 2019 the presence of BME students in our student community rose from 14.5 to 22 percent.” Whether this included postgraduates as well as undergraduates was left unclear. It would be helpful nonetheless to know what percentages if any might satisfy the authorities’ quest for rectitude in this domain.

* * *

All this reflects the progressive blurring of distinctions between quality and quantity which is a feature of central administrative governance and which has facilitated not only large-scale misuse of University resources but also adaptation to COVID-19. In the words of the Oration once more, “Running exams remotely was also a major achievement, with over 1,000 exams made available in more than 18,000 exam sittings over 10 weeks. The e-Assessment project will ensure that we have a secure and sustainable [Note the buzz-word] digital assessment service throughout the period of disruption, and will offer exam boards a greater range of choices for digital assessments in the future.” Not to mention open-book exams and mitigating circumstances procedures. One can only wonder for just how long exam boards will think these theatricals worth preserving—rather than simply issuing students with a certificate of course completion and enabling the hypothetical examiners to concentrate on their cutting-edge research.

On discrimination in general the authorities are plainly confused. Their long-standing support, both tacit and organised, for the introduction of digital assessment and other changes in Public Examinations suggests that they regard with disfavour our pre-existing classification system as a type of prejudice—presumably class (either intellectual or social) prejudice. At the same time, however, they have no qualms about exercising age-discrimination in spending large amounts of the University’s money on compelling capable academic scientists to retire at an arbitrary age threshold.

Considerations must reflect ends as well as means when reflecting on American higher education

ROBERT A. SCOTT

Commentary on “Different this side of the Pond?” by David Palfreyman, Oxford Magazine. No 423, Noughth Week, Michaelmas Term 2020

David Palfreyman’s brief summary of two new books on the direction of higher education in the United States highlights important issues. Yes, American higher education is highly stratified in terms of resources, prestige, and admissions selectivity. The rich institutions are immensely rich and are so desired by applicants and their families that they can garner even more wealth and prestige through their selective enrollment and fundraising practices. Palfreyman correctly points to the largely inadequate proposed corrections to the dynamics identified as problematic, such as the perpetuation of elites in society and growing income inequality.

Many of the proposed solutions to the perceived dysfunctions in American higher education suffer from some common elements. In general, they tend to talk about means but not ends; they tend to ignore public purpose and the role of public policy in relation to private benefits; and they tend to disregard practicalities.

First, the spate of books and articles about needed correctives seem to focus on the potential of large institutional size and technology as two means for broadening access to higher education. As we have seen with large corporations, the benefits of scale can be outweighed by the loss of perspective, inadequate attention to stakeholders, and an emphasis on short-term rather than longer-term goals. Likewise, the necessary turn to remote teaching and learning due to COVID has brought to light even more than before that not every student has access to the internet and a quiet place to study.

This shift to online teaching also highlighted the fact that remote learning requires skills, abilities, and foundational knowledge that those in less well-resourced communities seem to have in less supply. Motivation without preparation and assistance is not sufficient. So, while the “New American University” in the “Fifth Wave” of higher education institutions might help broaden access to larger segments of the population, they need to give at least equal attention to the ends or goals of advanced education as to the means for providing it.

Second, in a similar way, these pundits fail to discuss the connection between public policy and personal gain. During earlier periods in American higher education, such as the Land Grant Acts era, the G.I. Bill initiative, and the Sputnik response resulting in the National Defense Education Act, the federal government supported the public purposes of higher education.

These public purposes included scientific agriculture and medicine, the preparation of teachers and other pro-

fessionals to serve society’s needs, and further strengthening the nation’s economic and military competitiveness. Over time, the federal and state governments withdrew support in favor of competing needs such as pensions and prisons and the demands to lower taxes. With this reduction in public support came a push to raise tuition and fees as the price for the personal benefits that accrue from advanced education.

During the 1970 and 1980s, fluctuations in the number of high school graduates, disruptions in employment and the economy, and the increasing competitiveness of college admissions prompted families that could afford private college tuition to seek the lower costs at public universities. One consequence of this, since academic credentials are highly correlated to family socio-economic status (SES), was that public universities became more elite in their admissions selectivity, leading to the phenomenon of the “Public Ivy” and the “Public Liberal Arts College”.

With increased competition for admission, and with institutions seeking the prestige of higher rankings based in part on student’s standardized test scores, the demographic and economic make-up of public universities became more elite. In New York State, for example, the SES of families with students at the State University of New York is higher than that of most private institutions in the State. A higher percentage of private institution students receive Pell Grants, for example. Therefore, we see tax-supported state institutions enrolling top-tier students and private colleges serving as the institutions providing opportunity to the less affluent. This does not make sense in terms of public policy.

Another matter of public policy that is ignored in the discussions of the future of American higher education is the fate of small towns and outer suburbs. Many of these communities were founded as the nation’s population moved westward and created schools and colleges for the preparation of teachers and pastors. For many of these places, the local college, whether public or private, is the major employer and attraction for visitors. Any discussion of higher education dynamics must include them. It is not enough to discuss Arizona State as a model of future growth and ignore the consequences for the communities that are home to colleges like Colgate and Allegheny.

My third point concerns practicalities. Those who criticize Harvard and Yale, among a few others, for their admission policies and practices should recognize some basic facts.

Harvard, for example, admits under 5% of all those who apply. Yale admits under 7%. In other words, they must decide whether they will admit a class using a lottery, take the highest scoring students in descending order, or attempt to compose a class with a variety of charac-

teristics and life experiences. They choose diversity as a criterion because they know that academic credentials are highly correlated to the aforementioned SES and they want a more heterogeneous student body. On all counts, however, they choose candidates whom they believe will succeed.

Most colleges and universities do not have this challenge. According to the National Association of College Admissions Counselors, most institutions admit two-thirds of the applicants for freshman status. While 80% of those offered admission to Harvard accept the offer, well-known schools such as Dickinson and Purdue find that under 30% of those admitted accept their offer of admission. For many colleges, the yield on offers of admission is even lower and the graduation rate is barely over 50%. Therefore, I think the focus on challenging the admissions practices and taxing endowments at a few elite institutions that account for under 5% of the nation's 20 million college students is misguided. Such attention would be better placed on issues of adequate funding for public elementary and secondary schools, full-time faculty for public colleges and universities, financial aid for talented

students motivated to pursue advanced education in either public or private universities, and alternative forms of credentials.

It is interesting to note that the emphasis in these and other books is on changing successful elite institutions instead of promoting improvements for those institutions created to serve the average citizen. Why promote increasing the size of Harvard and Yale, making them even more corporate-like, when community colleges lack basic support from county and state governments? Why seek to weaken those institutions striving for excellence instead of fulfilling long-standing commitments to the advancement of higher education as both a public and a private benefit? Why focus on means such as scale without regard to ends such as preparing citizens as well as professionals? A proper focus on access and opportunity would consider these questions as well.

David Palfreyman has done a fine service in bringing these books to our attention and in prompting us to consider the policy and practical considerations of American higher education's future.

History Painting and Epic Poetry

c.1780–1830

A.D. HARVEY

A large part of the reason why Romanticism, after more than two hundred years, remains important in western culture is that the novelties of the 1790s and 1800s still have the power to speak directly to our sensibility. Wordsworth's celebration of daffodils beside a lake or of a lone farmgirl in a field singing of 'old, unhappy far-off things, / And battles long ago', Keats's letters, Coleridge's drug problem, Turner's water-colour sketches, Linnell's sunlit meadows, come to us still fresh, immediate, contemporary and illuminating. But they were the products of a period that also created images and traditions that seem alien to the preoccupations and aesthetic prejudices of the 2020s and which, where their continuing influence can be identified, seem to relate to those aspects of our culture with which we have the least sympathy.

Poems comprising over three hundred pages of post-Popian couplets:-

*Then, as his life's last currents from him ran,
On earth supinely sank the mighty Man,
Still turning to the cope of Heav'n his eye,
And fixing what remained of thought on high:
Till, like a mist that with gigantic strides
The rich variety of nature hides,
Death onward swept.*

or James Barry's oddly colour-muted canvases of men with thick ankles and Repertory Theatre costumes do not represent the past which most university Literature and Art History departments are struggling to preserve. The fact that between 1780 and 1800 well over three hundred epic poems were published in western Europe, including

seven on Joan of Arc, seven on Alfred the Great, and five on Charlemagne, and that History Painting (i.e. narrative paintings based on historical or pseudo-historical occurrences), the visual counterpart of epic poetry, obtained a new critical status and new levels of official encouragement during the same period, seems the kind of information that exists only to be paraded in the footnotes of the more obscure scholarly journals. (See for example *Philological Quarterly* vol.86 (2007), p.143–162.)

Quite apart from the observation that we will not understand either the past or ourselves if we only deign to examine those bits of the past that immediately strike us as congenial, it should be emphasised from the outset that the epic poetry and History Painting of the Romantic period were in the mainstream of the culture we have inherited. The epic poets include Goethe and Shelley and Alfred de Vigny and though neither *Hermann und Dorothea* nor *The Revolt of Islam* nor *Hélène* are now amongst those authors' most-read works, Keats's incomplete *Hyperion* is regarded by many as his finest poetic achievement; and Wordsworth's *Prelude*, though not an epic in the ordinary sense, was clearly influenced in its conception by the epic genre. The part played by epic in the development of the historical novel is evident from the fact that Walter Scott published half a dozen lengthy verse narratives before producing *Waverley*, the first novel whose theme is coming to terms with the past. History Painters include Louis David and Benjamin West and amongst those whose work was influenced by the History Painting tradition were Turner and Delacroix. And if, alongside the well-known names, we find a perhaps excessive number of practitioners who seemed barely capable of either responding to or trans-

mitting a tradition, we ought at least to ask ourselves what they thought they were doing, and why.

It is the *why* rather than the *what* and *who* of epic poetry and History Painting that justifies their re-examination. They were of course part of a Neo-classical revival which dominated most aspects of western European culture in the 1800s, from 'Empire-style' furniture and Greek-revival architecture to the sculptures of Thorwaldsen, Canova and Flaxman, and the town-planning projects of Nash. The Greeks and Romans provided an obvious model at a time when European governments, under the pressure of bankruptcy, social upheaval, revolution and finally wars of unprecedented expense, were attempting to mobilise their citizenry in support of national objectives; and part of the rejection of Neo-classicism detectable in Romantic writers of the Wordsworth generation is a rejection of the idea that the public sector has a right to mobilise art and literature for its own purposes.

Though receiving official backing, and not just in History painting and architecture—a number of junior gov-

ernment ministers and officials came forward as epic poets—it was Neo-classicism that was the loser in its contest with Romanticism. Most of the best Neo-classical buildings of the later eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries survive, though for the most part taken for granted as rather boring, or simply ignored, like London's King's Cross Station, a particularly fine late example, and today's literary and artistic practice seems essentially to represent the congealing candle-ends of the Romantic tradition. But the original point of Romanticism was its assertion of the individual against the demands of a collective that controlled most of the sources of patronage, and it may be that Romanticism ceased to be Romanticism once it became dominant culture and part of the idiom of conventional up-to-dateness. Certainly the novelties of the 1790s and the 1800s still *seem* to speak directly to our sensibilities, but we should always remember that they speak to us from across the gulf of two hundred years of runaway social change and what some people call intellectual progress.

Pastoral

Summer, the way home from school. A man
calls to his dog, in a town still battered,
but one where resurgent buddleia and rose-

bay willow-herb enlivened the ruins,
and, stripped bare by bombs, a Norman
chimney could enchant a country boy.

There were ships, bound for a world beyond -
the Queens, we all knew, bigger, grander,
but the old Aquitania perhaps more stylish

even in her last days - parks stretching
on all sides, the Indian bean tree bursting
each year into a cloud of bridal blossom

dotted purple and gold, the aviary with
Toffee the macaw, cheerfully raucous,
where the angel spread his verdigris wings

obliquely to the cenotaph, the Indian
bean, the bedding-plants, the tram-
stop only a few years without trams ...

Evening settles over the town. And
Come here, yells the man at his dog.
Come here, or I'll knock your block off!

The rose-garden, the fountain playing,
bracken in empty cellars in what once
was Birmingham Street. And the bus home.

NICOLAS JACOBS

Nicolas Jacobs, by origin a Wessex man, born in the New Forest, but now living in North Wales, is a dedicated though not always a very effective gardener. Educated at Christ Church and having for many years taught mediaeval English at Jesus, he has, beside academic publications in English, French and Welsh, published poetry in a number of small magazines over the past fifty years. These include *New Measure*, *Delta*, *English*, *Swansea Review*, *Agenda*, *London Magazine*, *Oxford Magazine*, *Archipelago* and, most recently, *PN Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review* and *Raceme*.

Revolutions

In a hushed parlour, Samuel Taylor Coleridge
Is working on his plan for paradise.
A cheddar-toasting salamander cools
And in the walls are lean fraternal mice.

After the guillotine's cold savage reason,
He still believes Utopia can be born:
Aspheterism, Pantisocracy
Will grow next year amid prodigious corn

Beside the ever-hazy Susquehanna...
The baby sleeps. A moonbeam track is slanting
Across a chair, but nothing touches quiet.
Tomorrow in the garden, beans need planting.

KIERON WINN

Kieron Winn's first collection of poetry, *The Mortal Man*, was published in 2015: 'superb collection' (*Agenda*); 'the level of craft in these poems is a delight' (Clive James). Recent poems have appeared in *The London Magazine*, *New Statesman*, *The Spectator* and *The Times Literary Supplement*; 'Revolutions' appeared first in *The Hudson Review*. www.kieronwinn.com

REVIEWS

From nitty-gritty to high-falutin via accountability



Herewith a trio from the vast list of books on HE flowing from The Johns Hopkins University Press. I find it difficult to believe there are now not more authors of texts on HE than any possible quantum of readers of such books.

William F. Massy takes us into the nitty-gritty with his *Resource Management for Colleges and Universities* (2020), starting off with the 'flaws' in 'their decision-making cultures and business models'—and offering up three new modern 'academic resourcing' mechanisms (AR) that could be used to weave through the 'internal economies' (Model 1) and break through 'the cultural barriers' of institutions so as then to link with Model 2 concerned with the 'external economic' context within which the University operates, and also flow into Model 3 ('mission-market-margin') used to balance the academic mission with 'financial and market factors'.

This is a worthy Christmas treat for the planning nerds struggling to apply analytics and data to the Black Box of academic operations—which might then 'provide levers for institutional steering and the stimulation of change' (and that is precisely why the faculty will not want the lid on the Black Box lifted and let alone the arcane mysteries of their craft peered into so as to 'stimulate improvement at all levels of academic granularity' and thereby achieve progress by 'balancing quality with cost'—and as for 'faculty effort profiles'...).

Moving to the other end of the spectrum we have W. Moner et al as editors (2020) *Redesigning Liberal Education—Innovative Design for a C21 Undergraduate Education*. A series of case-studies looks at new efforts to sell a revamped form of liberal education that can demonstrate 'the importance and relevance of a liberal education' and thereby meet the challenge of 'neoliberal reimaginings of higher education'. The standard supposed 'valuable and vital' benefits of a liberal education are rehearsed as not being a frivolous undertaking' but instead (subject to a degree of 'redesign') 'an inherently practical one'—offering employers 'broad skills over narrow job training' with an ability to 'function effectively both interpersonally and intrapersonally'. Thus it is time to 'Liberate Liberal Education'—'Liberal Education Must Liberate itself from its Resistance to Transformation'. And it is a matter of 'Reclaiming the Narrative for Higher Education'.

Finally, Robert Kelchen (2018), *Higher Education Accountability*—how are US HE institutions coping with overwhelmingly intrusive scrutiny, in being held to account for their use of taxpayer funds? US HE is very costly, very inefficient, and very ineffective in terms of quality. No wonder it is increasingly challenged about its vfm and accountability to its customers and to taxpayers. This book asks: Can a College improve its outcomes within available resources? Can relevant outcomes be measured effectively and efficiently anyway? Can there be adequate rewards or sanctions to get a player to change behaviour? Do Colleges game or cheat their way to supposedly improved results?

There is interesting discussion of the

Obama Federal Government's extensive 'College Scorecard' as the latest in a very long line of attempts to provide applicants/students with appropriate 'consumer information'—much the same stuff as being called for over here by the DfE and as being introduced by the OfS. But in the USA there are, of course, also varying 'State Accountability Policies', as explored in Chapter 4; followed by chapters on failed self-regulation 'accreditation' mechanisms, on 'rankings' and 'league-tables'; on internal policing of quality & standards (noting 'the growing impatience of trustees and students combined with a shrinking portion of American faculty members taking on governance responsibilities').

The book ends with 'Ten Lessons Learned from Accountability Policies' and then speculation on 'The Future of Higher Education Accountability'... which includes the Question: 'Is there the necessary political will to close colleges that do not meet performance standards?'. Kelchen concludes that 'accountability efforts can at least marginally improve the behaviour of some of [America's worst colleges]... [with] accountability pressure continuing to rise at the expense of the autonomy many colleges and universities have traditionally enjoyed... [there is no longer, on the part of non-faculty stakeholders, any willingness to] to trust colleges to the extent that they did several decades ago...'.

The key word is perhaps 'marginally'—would we tolerate such a low ambition with respect to weak schools, inadequate hospitals, poor policing, shoddy and failing public services of any kind?

DAVID PALFREYMAN

The *Oxford Magazine* is edited by

Tim Horder

&

Ben Bollig

The *Magazine* normally appears in Noughth, Second, Fifth and Eighth Weeks each Term.
Submissions (preferably by e-mail to: tim.horder@dpag.ox.ac.uk, benjamin.bollig@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk) should be received by the Wednesday of the previous week.

Literary Editor:

Jane Griffiths at Wadham

Sir – The coming changes to the Single Sign-On (SSO) system discussed in your second-week issue have now been announced to students within an email newsletter. Sadly, the proffered link to ‘more information’ leads to a page on which SSO seems to be malfunctioning: even if one has already signed in, one is told to sign in to view its content. Perhaps there are no coincidences.

An aspect of the system as it stands that deserves some attention is the way that it prevents students from viewing information intended for staff. This is no doubt necessary in some cases, but in others it is surely questionable what harm there could be in our witnessing and understanding such communications. In a time when many students are ignorant of the issues facing academic staff, or even fail to discriminate between their lecturers’ decisions and those of the central administration, in whose interest is it to keep students in the dark?

Yours sincerely
FINN JARVIS
Trinity College

Measuring disadvantage

Sir – The vaunted initiatives by Oxford and Cambridge to increase widening participation of Black students are welcome and timely but, unfortunately, they primarily target under-representation rather than disadvantage. In addition, although BAME students now make up approximately 1/5th of the new Oxford undergraduate intake, only 1/4 of that group are classified as disadvantaged¹, using an established proxy for disadvantaged status (ACORN 4/5 category).

This leaves students across all ethnic and racial backgrounds from a broader range of disadvantaged, working class backgrounds struggling to enter either undergraduate and postgraduate education and to remain in it.² The Education Policy Institute defines a pupil as persistently disadvantaged if they have been on free school meals >80% of their school life.³ As the recent campaign by Marcus Rashford highlighted, in this year, one in six children qualify for free school meals, the highest level since 2014.⁴

Higher education institutions must now move away from judging their intake only by the proportion of ethnic minority or state school pupils and rather focus on the proportion of disadvantaged students they admit. Universities must therefore publish the data for incoming students who received free school meals and what targets they have set for this group; students on free school meals represents disadvantaged young people of every colour.

TO THE EDITOR

My experience in this and other universities, and in the learned societies, tallies completely with the sentiments of Trevor Phillips, former chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, who has experienced nervousness among academics about investigating the disadvantaged... *of every colour*.⁵ As with Phillips, I always find a degree of timidity in colleagues when confronted with these questions, which are not apparent, for example, when shining a light on our failings in relation to BAME student intake.

Any national ‘Levelling Up’ campaign must accelerate the uptake of all children from free school meals background into higher education. The House of Commons Education Committee records that free school meal eligibility is the recognised proxy for economic deprivation and disadvantage.⁶ By publishing the data for incoming students who received free school meals and announcing what targets they have set for this group of disadvantaged young people of every colour, Oxford can play a pivotal role in this noble initiative to confront social injustice.

¹ Undergraduate Admissions, University of Oxford.

² ‘Scholars of class’, Geraldine Van Bueren, QC, Letters, *The Times*, 03 October, 2020, p 30.

³ ‘Education in England: Annual Report 2020’, Education Policy Institute, Fair Education Alliance, Jo Hutchinson, Mary Reader and Avinash Akhal, August 2020.

⁴ ‘Free school meals barometer’, *The Spectator*, 31 October 2020, p 20.

⁵ ‘The ethnic question we’re too scared to answer’, Trevor Phillips, *The Times*, 02 November, 2020.

⁶ ‘Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children’, House of Commons, London, Session 2014–2016.

Yours sincerely
PETER EDWARDS
St Catherine’s College

Sir – Peter Oppenheimer advocates dialogue between academics and the central administration (*Oxford Magazine*, No. 423, Noughth Week, MT 2020; No. 424, Second Week, MT 2020). I fear that he is crying in the Wilderness.

On 10 June 2015 I wrote a letter to Prof Louise Richardson at the Principal’s Office at St Andrew’s. She had just been appointed Oxford’s Vice-Chancellor, coinciding with the publication of an article in the *Spectator* by Melanie McDonagh describing Peter’s efforts to prevent the metastatic growth of the University’s administration at the expense of its academic activity.

I went on to write that the current and previous V-Cs had not sought to engage Peter in any dialogue, and I politely asked her to meet him as soon after taking up her post as possible.

In reply I received a picture post-card thanking me for my letter and saying that she was looking forward to taking up her new post. There was no mention of Peter Oppenheimer.

As readers of the *Magazine* will know, Peter has continued with his efforts to engage the central administration, right up until the last two issues. I understand that the V-C has not met him...yet.

Yours sincerely
ROBIN JACOBY
Oxford

CONTENTS

No. 425 Fifth Week Michaelmas Term 2020

A good disaster BEN BOLLIG, TIM HORDER	1	Considerations must reflect ends as well as means when reflecting on American higher education ROBERT A. SCOTT	11
Admissions Training – meet the Blob ROGER TEICHMANN	2	History Painting and Epic Poetry c.1780–1830 A.D. HARVEY	12
On lives mattering WILLIAM BOOTH	4	Pastoral NICOLAS JACOBS	13
The Making Third Time Around JOHN MOLE	6	Revolutions KIERON WINN	13
This October, winnowing CARMEN BUGAN	6	From nitty-gritty to high-falutin via accountability DAVID PALFREYMAN	14
Pinocchio Stained Glass Statements On Tuesday Evenings MERRYN WILLIAMS	9		

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

• **Roger Teichmann** is a Lecturer in Philosophy at St Hilda's • **William Booth** is a Lecturer in Modern History at St Catherine's • **Michael Biggs** is a sociologist at St Cross • **Robert A Scott** was a Senior Visiting Research Fellow, Rothermere American Institute, and Visiting Fellow, Mansfield College, 2015 • **A.D. Harvey** read History at St John's 1966-1969; his latest book is *Side Stories* (Mandrake 2020) • **David Palfreyman** is Bursar of New College •